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Say sayonara to wabi-sabi – the Japanese practice of finding the beauty in imperfection that has dominated the design scene for the past year – and konnichiwa to yugen, the ancient Japanese principle of finding presence and peace in the subtle beauty of life.

The Japan-born, London-based interior designer Yoko Kloeden says: “Wabi-sabi has become a trendy design word, but it doesn’t always have a positive meaning. Wabi means simple or humble. Sabi translates as rustic or even worn out. It’s not quite grotty but could also mean shabby.”

Yugen has its roots in Zen Buddhism and Noh theatre, revered by the 14th-century playwright Zeami, who described it as “an elegant, mysterious beauty that lies beyond words.”

Kloeden says: “Yugen is something beautiful that you can’t quite articulate. It’s subtle, unspoken – suggestive rather than attention-grabbing. For instance, if you create a beautiful window seat looking out over the garden, you’d be tempted to go and sit there with a really nice cup of coffee or tea.”

Since setting up Yoko Kloeden Design in 2016, she aims to cultivate harmony and simplicity in balanced, calm spaces rather than a “kitsch, contrived” pastiche of Japanese aesthetics in a western context. Pertinent to this is the concept of taru wo shiru: “I don’t like living in a big house. You need more stuff; you have to clean extra rooms. [Taru wo shiru] is about knowing what’s enough. Then you can ... make one space multifunctional – either

The A-Zen of design

Meet the interiors expert bringing temple-style tranquillity, calm and simplicity into her clients’ lives. By Victoria Brzezinski



took her all over the globe that she realised the effect of being surrounded by meditative spaces. “Between lectures I’d go to the temple gardens for a wind-down,” she says, recalling the rustle of bamboo and dappled sunlight through the trees. After graduating, glossy airport lounges and Identikit apartments became Kloeden’s day-to-day reality: “I was travelling for half the year. I felt more depressed [in these spaces]. Then it dawned on me that where you are has an impact on how you feel.”

While working in Singapore, where she met her Australian husband, whenever she could pick her own accommodation she would opt for a small boutique hotel in an old colonial building.

Pregnant and looking for a more creative outlet, Kloeden and her husband relocated to London in 2010. She took a year off with her newborn and began figuring out whether interior design could be a viable career. “Then the kids kept coming. We’ve got three now. I started freelancing.”

Kloeden honed her design style on a visit to a Japanese temple garden. Taking in the atmosphere, with incense heavy in the air, she pondered on what makes people feel nurtured and happy in a space and want to stay there.

A palette of natural materials and textures is her signature, with timber playing a big part. “It’s a fantastic material, structural as well as decorative. It smells nice; feels nice; if you drop something on timber it’s not as jarring as dropping something on tiles.”

One of Kloeden’s projects, Botanic House in Chiswick, west London, weaves together vintage oak flooring, oak ply, fluted oak cladding and oak furniture. She allayed the client’s concerns that it would give ski chalet vibes, instead these wooden textures create depth and interest.

This included rejigging the layout to maximise hikari (light). “Often integrating indoor-outdoor is a core brief,” she says, and this was no different. The new floor plan incorporates minimal sliding glass doors and picture windows to frame views of the garden’s greenery. “Almost every project now includes a window seat,” she says.

Perhaps Kloeden’s most overtly Japanese-looking project was for a couple from Hong Kong who live in a 1960s terrace in Ealing, west London. There’s a tatami mattress room divided from the main living area with shoji screens. The hallway was given special attention. “In east Asia shoes stay at the entrance, so we elongated the hallway and built floor-to-ceiling shoe storage. That storage is a huge part of what we do,” Kloeden says.



Yoko Kloeden in her Ealing project, inset. The Botanic House kitchen, left, and window seat, right

Japanese design principles

- **Hikari (light)** beyond function, light creates atmosphere throughout the day
- **Nagame (view)** the importance of windows to frame nature
- **Ma (space)** leaving negative space to allow a home to breathe
- **Shizen (nature)** organic elements such as wood, stone and handmade ceramics
- **Taru wo shiru (just enough)** refined restraint

“I don’t think you need to fill every wall and corner with stuff”

pared-back than what westerners think. I love decluttering and I don’t think you have to fill every wall and corner with stuff. You need space to breathe and relax.”

Kloeden grew up in Kyoto, surrounded by thousand-year-old temples and Shinto shrines. The city was originally called Heian-kyo, which means “capital of peace and tranquillity”, and it wasn’t until Kloeden’s corporate job

with partitions or furniture. It applies to everything; for example, in Japan we finish eating at 80 per cent full.”

Kloeden aims to create clutter-free, family spaces that are easy to live with and complement period features. “We often design for families; of course you want to be together but you still want a bit of separation,” she says.

“What we think is balanced in Japan is probably more